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ABSTRACT

A survey of 113 college and university second language teachers in Japan, Nigeria, and other African countries gathered information on attitudes toward and concerns about teaching large classes. Responses to one question, "Large classes make it difficult to do what I would like to because...," were categorized into three groups: affective factors, effectiveness, and effort required. After problems with coding were overcome, analysis indicated that about 24% referred to affective factors concerning both teachers and students, 33% to effort required to teach, and 43% to instructional effectiveness. This suggests that while teachers find large classes unpleasant to work with and hard work, the most compelling reason for disliking the situation is the feeling that their teaching is not effective. Many responses acknowledged the differences among learners but also suggest that teachers do not recognize that students can take some responsibility for their own learning. Further research using the same question in other countries is under way. The entire questionnaire used is appended. (MSE)

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LANCASTER - LEEDS

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

RESEARCH PROJECT

# WHAT TEACHERS CANNOT DO IN LARGE CLASSES

NICKI MCLEOD

PROJECT REPORT NO. 7

Nicki McLeod
***What Teachers Cannot Do in Large Classes***

Published by Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project

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This report[1] is based on a preliminary analysis of data collected from a total of 113 teachers in tertiary institutions in Japan, Nigeria and other African countries.[2] These teachers responded to a questionnaire developed by the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Group. The questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix 1.

I analysed the responses to the first question in the questionnaire which dealt with the problems posed by large classes. Respondents were asked to complete the following statement :

> **Large classes** make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because ...

I first divided the responses into a number of categories which included : the problems of individual learners, physical constraints, quantity of marking, discipline and control, learning and teaching, and classroom interaction. These categories were suggested by Coleman in his analysis of data from Nigeria (Project Report No. 6, 1989). They were ad hoc categories, derived from the responses made by the Nigerian respondents.

When I looked at the analysis based on these categories I decided that it might be possible to attempt to group the responses into three main categories :

**Affective Factors** **Effective Factors** **Effort Required.**

I could then tabulate the frequency of mention of each of the factors and see whether there was a balance among the three factors or whether one was mentioned more often than the others and, if so, which one that was.

The coding of the responses was extremely difficult as it is often not possible to determine whether a particular problem, for example the problem of noise, was one which forced the teacher to make a greater ***effort***, one which prevented ***effective*** teaching or learning, or one which ***affected*** the teacher or the students.

> Noise. If teaching oral skills, the teacher must get the students to speak. If the activity is truly interesting, the noise level rises greatly.
>
> Trying to have an active class leads to a noisier class.

When there was a problem of assigning comments to a particular category, I looked at the answers to the second question in the questionnaire ('With an **ideal** number of students in my class, I could...') to see whether what was said could clarify responses to the first question. In the case of the first comment on noise, quoted above, the respondent did not mention problems of discipline but said that, with an ideal number of students, he/she 'could use more drama techniques'. Consequently, I put the comment about noise in the **'Effective'** category. The second respondent, however, in answering the second question, said that she/he could 'Hopefully, have more

control when necessary'. I therefore considered the comment about noise to be a reference to the 'Effort' needed.

Another problem was that many of the respondents seemed to be using the label 'large classes' as a coverall term to refer to all the problems they encountered in their teaching situations. There were a number of references to :

- poor background of the students
- lack of resources such as video and tape recorders
- the syllabus being too demanding
- lack of time and infrequent classes
- too much administrative duties
- shuttling from one campus to another (around 10km).

For the purposes of this analysis, I eliminated those responses which did not bear directly on the problem of the large number of students in the class.

There were problems of coding. But, with some reservations, what I found can be summarised as follows.

Of the 333 separate reasons given for finding large classes difficult :

- 79 or 23.7% seemed to refer to ***affective*** factors concerning both the teachers and the students;
- 110 or 33.0% referred to the ***effort*** required to teach in large classes;
- 144 or 43.3% made reference to the problem of ***effective*** teaching in large classes.

Examples of the first category, ***affective*** factors, are :

It is impossible to establish rapport with individual students.

I can't get to know their names or to know them individually.

Large classes prevent me from making eye contact with all students.

I get bored when needing to do so much pair and group work.

Examples of the second category, the amount of ***effort*** needed from the teacher, included :

It is hard work for the teacher to speak with louder voice than in small classes.

Oral work is difficult.

I would like to give tests as frequently as possible and mark or correct their papers and give them back their papers as quickly as possible.

Homework takes forever to correct.

We have a classroom management problem : how to keep discipline, to avoid a lot of noise.

In some schools it is a joy to teach 44 students but in others it's absolute hell and demands so much mental and physical effort to 'police' the class.

For the third category, ***effective*** teaching, examples given were :

I cannot evaluate the performance of each student.

When the class is a large one the teacher can't move a lot. He even has to be always facing the pupils - there's a poor management of the classroom.

The results in teaching/learning process are not good.

> I tend to avoid complicated but potentially exciting stuff because of the horrendous task of setting it up with a large class.
>
> They don't pay attention at all; they speak to each other.

The conclusion we might draw from this data is that teachers find large classes unpleasant to work in from both the teachers' and the students' points of view and that the amount of effort required of the teacher makes working with large classes very hard work. But the most compelling reason for disliking teaching large classes is the feeling that their teaching is not effective.

These three factors can be summed up in the words of three of the respondents :

> I myself just feel overwhelmed by the number of students. I have to speak loudly : this makes me feel nervous and self-conscious. That exhausts me ... I can't be myself. That's the most important thing when I teach. I hate microphone.
>
> I have to shout when I stop group activity.
>
> I don't think I actually teach the largest classes anything.

All the responses clearly indicate a particular view of the teacher's role and of the process of teaching and learning. The respondents view teaching as a process initiated and controlled by a teacher and undergone by a learner. For example, the following comments would seem to support the view that the teachers feel frustrated because they can't ***teach*** :

> As the time is limited, I can't let the students do oral exercises one by one. I have to choose only a few students to answer the questions. I'd like all the students to say a word or a sentence in one school period, but sometimes I can't.
>
> I cannot always keep the students active (in responding to me).
>
> I get bored when needing to do so much pair and group work.
>
> I do not get the opportunity to talk to everyone and control their work.

Many of the reactions seem to acknowledge that differences exist among learners. The large number of respondents who stated that they could not give their students individual attention supports this but the teachers do not seem to recognise that learners can take some of the responsibility for their own learning or become more autonomous, more reliant on other learners and less on the teacher in a large class.

This attempt to categorise the responses to the first question of the 'difficulties' questionnaire into three factors (Affective Factors, Effectiveness and Effort Required) has been a useful first step towards creating some order in the data gathered. Since this analysis was carried out, a group of researchers at Lancaster University have been analysing more responses to the same questionnaire collected from several other countries. They have used a different set of categories which may prove more precise and easier to code. (See Sarangi, Project Report No. 10, 1989.)

**Notes**

1 This paper was first presented in the Colloquium 'Language Learning and Teaching in Large Classes : Current Research' which was held during the 1988 TESOL Convention in Chicago.

2 These 113 respondents include the 33 Nigerian university lecturers whose responses have been analysed by Coleman (Project Report No. 6, 1989).

**Appendix 1 : Questionnaire**

Many teachers say that teaching English in large classes is a problem for them. But in what way are large classes a problem? How do large classes stop teachers from doing what they would like to do? Your responses to this questionnaire will help us to answer these questions.

Under each of the following, please list as many points as you can.

1 **Large classes** make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because :

2 With an **ideal** number of students in my class, I could :

3 When I am teaching a **large class**, I help my students to learn English by :

4 Do you have any other comments or questions about teaching and learning in **large classes**?

5 Is the institution you teach in (please ring the appropriate letter) :

primary/elementary? a
secondary? b
college/university? c
other (please specify)? d

6 In principle, would you be willing to help us with future research into large classes (perhaps by responding to another questionnaire)? **YES/NO**

Thank you very much for your help.

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